

ROAD 31 WINE CO.

grin-inducing pinot

Road 31 Wine Co. 2011 Pinot Noir Napa Valley

Harvest dates: Sep. 30 and Oct. 1

Oak: 33% new; (60% French, 40% Tokaji/Hungarian)

pH at bottle: 3.68

Alcohol at bottle: 13.9%

Brix at harvest: 25.2 to 26.2

Time on Oak: 11 months

TA at bottle: 5.52 g/L

Total production: 680 cases

Vineyard: Three vineyards contributed to this wine. From the Nord Vineyard, at the southern mouth of the Napa River where the water spills into the San Pablo/San Francisco Bay, comes the prettiness of clone 115. Stanly Ranch, in Carneros just west across the Napa River from Nord, provides the structure of clone 114 and the robustness of clone 777. Finally, a “new old” friend, a re-planted vineyard on a hillside that I used to get fruit from (before it was torn out): Castrucci Vineyard on Suscol Riddge provides a more powerful, hillside presentation of clone 115.

Vintage: 2011 was a sensory triumph, and a fiscal disaster. To understand the vintage is to understand botrytis, the “noble rot” that—while a critical part of making famous desert wines—is not welcome in red wines. Pinot Noir thrives in cool, coastal climates, which are also ripe environments for botrytis. Indeed, this particular year was unrivaled in its coolness and its length. Alas, the rains hit before ripening, and botrytis set in. I thought all was lost. BUT, we got a subsequent ten day warm and dry spell, thinned out rotted fruit (dropping 50% of the total crop on the ground), and by virtue of some, enigmatic, Darwinistic twist, the surviving bunches were fantastic. And I mean fantastic: that long, cool growing season was a triumph for the remaining clusters. This is the smallest—but best—crop I’ve ever worked with.

Winemaking: A short cold soak preceded ten days in fermenter—a shorter fermentation than normal to make sure we kept the botrytis at bay. I let the fermenter run hot, however, which brought some great extraction. Run to barrel before the finish of fermentation, the wine sat on its gross lees (without racking) for the entire time it was in barrel, which added wonderful texture and weight to the mid-palate. Judicious use of Tokaji (Hungarian) oak for a portion of the new oak contributed a nice hint of spice to the profile.

Wine: “That wine was fantastic ... what, there’s no more?” That will be the prevailing wisdom on this vintage. Opening with a profuse nose of violets, red fruits, and a hint of cola, the wine has surprising weight on the palate, with both cherry and blackberry flavors wrapped in all kinds of earth: mushrooms, forest floor, leather, tobacco. Seriously, this wine is a mix unlike any I’ve ever crafted—truly a unique and glorious year.

Road 31 Wine Co. produces tiny batches of one handcrafted Napa Valley Pinot Noir. The label pays homage to the gravel road outside my grandparents’ homestead back in Kansas—where I too was born—and the mighty green ’66 Ford Truck that drove it regularly. My grandfather, a farmer, willed the truck to me when he passed in ’86, and the truck now seems right at home bouncing among the vines of Napa. The green truck and I oversee farming, harvest and hauling of the grapes to cave space borrowed from some friends up in Stag’s Leap district of Napa. My hands handle every step of the crafting: fermenting, barrel aging, bottling, and peddling. I am a one-man show (with a little help now and then from my wife, my cousins, and Daisy Dog).

—Kent Fortner (Winemaker/Truck Owner)



NAPA VALLEY